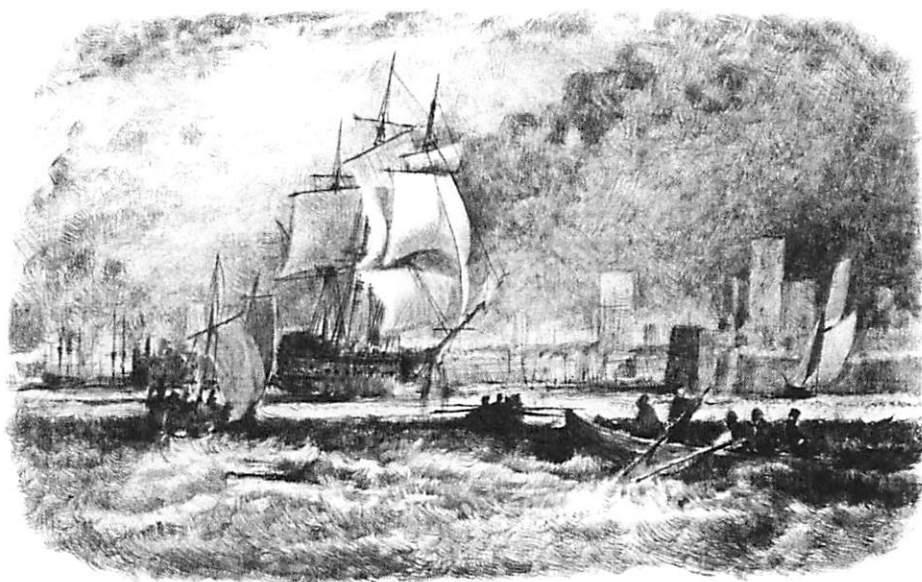


《 The Life 》



GREAT writers aren't often people born into some special family, nor are they necessarily very rich or very clever or very lucky. They're not always people who have seen or heard hundreds of amazing or odd things. But a great writer has to be someone who spends a good deal of time watching, listening, and wondering—and a good deal more time telling us about it.

When Charles John Huffam Dickens was born, he found himself in a small first-floor bedroom at the front of a little house in Portsmouth, on the south coast of England. It was Friday, February 7, 1812, and baby Charles had an eighteen-month-old sister, Frances, or Fanny, as

she was called. The view from the window of the bedroom was (and still is!) of a small front garden, but in those days, you could also see fields of hay and vegetables, some windmills, and beyond them, Portsmouth Harbour. The room had no carpets, just bare boards, and at night it was lit with oil lamps and candles.

Charles's mother, who was twenty-three when he was born, was named Elizabeth, and she came from a family of musical instrument makers. He said that she often sent his sisters and him "into uncontrollable fits of laughter by her funny sayings and inimitable mimicry" —or, as we would say now, doing impressions of other people. But there was scandal in her family: not long before Charles was born, Elizabeth's father stole some money from the Navy Pay Office, and when he was found out, he ran away to the Isle of Man.

Charles's father, John, worked for the navy. Nothing special, he was the man who helped do the sums and keep the records in the office that paid out the seamen's money. But he liked to pretend he was grander than he was. He dressed like a gentleman and spoke in an upper-class voice. Perhaps he was imitating his parents, who had been servants in upper-class people's houses. He was always, always, always short of money, and always either spending it or borrowing it.

One of the most important things about Charles's childhood was that his family never stayed very long in the same house. Five months after he was born, they moved to another street in the same town. Eighteen

months later, they moved again, and the first of Charles's six younger brothers and sisters was born. Soon after that, they had to move into lodgings (what we would now call an apartment) in a house that's still there in London's West End. It wasn't long before they moved again, to a place on the east coast, Sheerness, and then to the port of Chatham. Chatham seemed a magical place to Charles, age five. A "dream of chalk, and drawbridges, and mastless ships, in a muddy river," he called it. There were tunnels and fields to play in, streets full of poor and maimed soldiers and sailors just back from the wars, and a river for outings where you could sail past boats of all shapes and sizes—even a hospital ship and prison ships—and a dockyard where ships were built.



Charles's first school was his mother. "I faintly remember her teaching me the alphabet," he said, but after that he went with his older sister, Fanny, to what was called at that time a dame school. An old lady, sitting in a room over a shop where clothes were dyed, tried to teach a small group of children how to read and write. She "ruled the world with the birch," Dickens said, meaning a birch stick that she used to beat the children.



Very soon, young Charles began to read picture books "all about scimitars and slippers and turbans and dwarfs and giants and genii and fairies, and Blue-beards and bean-stalks and riches and caverns and forests . . . and all new and all true." He loved "Jack the Giant-Killer" and "Little Red Riding Hood." As an adult, he could still bring to mind scenes from these books: a bull pulling a bell rope in the nursery rhyme "Who Killed Cock Robin?"; a Russian peasant in the snow; a ray of light on Cain in the story from the Bible in which Cain kills Abel. "Different peculiarities of dress, of face, of gait, of manner, were written indelibly on my memory," Dickens wrote later. Verses from poems and hymns, as well

as the stories that the family's servants told, went into the little boy's mind too and stayed there—along with memories of flying a kite, seeing the future king ride by in a coach, watching a man with a wooden leg, staring at a line of convicts bound together by chains, and getting into trouble for saying that some paper that looked like marble wasn't real marble!

Dickens was also haunted by one particular image: "It's a figure that I once saw, just after dark, chalked upon a door in a little back lane near a country church. . . . It horrified me. . . . It smokes a pipe, and has a big hat with each of its ears sticking out . . . a pair of goggle eyes, and hands like two bunches of carrots." Even when he was a world-famous writer, he would lie awake at night and remember "the running home, the looking behind, the horror of its following me."

Sometimes he was taken by relatives (for what was at that time a huge treat) to the theater in London. On one occasion, he saw the famous clown Grimaldi. Near his home was another theater, the Theatre Royal, Rochester, which is still standing today. Dickens called it a "sweet, dingy, shabby little country theatre." Here he saw plays by Shakespeare, like *Macbeth*, with its horror and murders, but also comedies, thrillers, and pantomimes. He loved them all, especially the pantomimes, with their moments of sadness and craziness, their comic dances and rhymed speeches, their boldness, madness, coarseness, and splendor. In those days, actors also staged extracts from their shows at fairs in the open air, and he adored these too.

At home he played with paper and cardboard theaters, controlling the characters with wires. He would put on plays and do all the voices, moving the little figures on and off the stage. It wasn't long before he was singing and reciting for parties, and even standing on the table, singing duets with his sister Fanny at the Mitre Inn in Rochester.

When he was nine, Charles left the dame school and went to a school run by the young son of a Baptist minister. Here he had to recite famous poems, learn grammar, do arithmetic and handwriting, and study the morals of the stories in the Bible. At home, though, he gave himself another kind of education—reading the books on his father's shelves, like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, and especially one called *Tales of the Genii*—a version of *Arabian Nights*. People who knew Dickens as a boy said he used to go up to the top of the house while the other children were out playing, and pore over books and act out the characters to the audience of furniture in the room. "In all these golden fables," he said later, "there was never gold enough for me. I always wanted more. I saw no reason why there should not be mountains and rivers of gold, instead of paltry little caverns and olive pots." At another time he said he used to get his revenge on people he disliked by turning them into the bad characters in the books.

So here we see Charles, ten years old, engrossed in books, and then all on his own, acting them out, turning real life into stories, real people into characters in his little plays. But he was often miserable. Some kind

of illness, which people today think was connected with his kidneys, slowed him down all through his childhood. It meant he often had to lie and watch others play rather than join them. A brother and a sister died because of illness, so the danger and worry of poor health and the terrible sadness of a child's death were never far from his family's thoughts.





Times at home were far from easy. John and Elizabeth Dickens went on having children, but John spent more money than he earned. This meant that when Charles was ten, the family had to pack up and move to what was then the edge of London, Camden Town. This wasn't the desperately poor, cramped, slum London that appears in many of Dickens's books. It was more like a village, with fields and footpaths, no streetlights or buses. Even so, Dickens remembered it as dingy, damp, and dismal, and their house as having a wretched little back garden. His father became increasingly ill-tempered and seemed less interested in him—or so Dickens would say later in life.

Although Charles loved school, his father made him stop going, as they couldn't afford it, and yet he paid for Charles's older sister, Fanny, to go to the Royal Academy of Music in 1823, where she studied piano, grammar, religious education, arithmetic, and Italian. Charles felt hurt and abandoned. Fanny had been his great friend at school, and now here she was, leaving him. Perhaps he even felt that Fanny was cheating him of what he wanted or should by rights have for himself.

It was at this time that Charles, young as he was, started wandering the streets of London by himself. He would also go with the rest of the family to visit relatives in the industrial parts of London and down by the River Thames. This wasn't just a matter of sightseeing, although the rows of houses, the masts of ships rising



above the rooftops, the boat building, and the chain making all made a strong impression on Dickens. The visits were often a form of begging. His father would go to see relatives and friends to ask them for money, and Charles would find himself taking part in scenes that crop up over and over again in his books: poor people trying to make a living, people who were once well off now ruined, better-off people talking to the not-so-well-off.

As the family's money situation worsened, Charles also took part in visits to the pawnbroker's. A pawnbroker is someone who will give you some money for things you own. A short while later, if you can't buy them back, he will sell them. What this meant to Charles was that all the things in his house that he loved and cared about might sometime soon be sitting in a shop window. Even cutlery, books, chairs, and silk hankies might fetch a few pennies, but their loss made the Dickens family home poorer and poorer.

All this was bad enough, but what happened next was even worse. Just after his twelfth birthday, Charles was sent to work at Warren's Blacking—a factory where they made black boot polish. It was right by the muddy, stinking River Thames, “a crazy, tumble-down old house” with “rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times.” It was a place that would appear in one shape or another in many of Dickens's books.

Charles's job was to take a pot full of blacking and cover it first with oily paper, then with blue paper, tie it round with string, and cut the paper close to the string so that it looked neat. Next he had to paste a printed label onto each pot. He walked three miles to the factory, worked for ten and a half hours a day, with just a lunch break at twelve and a tea break in the late afternoon, and then walked the three miles home. As you read this, you might try to imagine doing this yourself, age twelve, for six days a week, month after month. You can see why people say that Charles Dickens had his childhood "snatched from him."

A few days after Charles started work at Warren's Blacking, his father was arrested for debt and sent to a special prison for people who owed money. This meant that the family was broken up. A new scene now appeared in the young boy's life: regular visits to a cold, damp, filthy prison to see his father. Again, try to imagine how strange and difficult this must have been for him. He felt shock and horror at what had happened, but there was also the shame of falling as low as this. And he couldn't help blaming his parents, a feeling made worse when his mother went to stay with his father in prison and he was sent to lodge with a woman who lived round the corner.

At Warren's Blacking, Charles's workmates were a mix of orphans and working people's sons. We know from what he said later that he saw himself as superior to these boys and that being with them felt like a humiliation. Yet they were kind to him. When he fell to the floor with

one of the seizures that his illness brought on, his workmates laid him on the straw on the factory floor, filled some empty blacking pots with hot water, and put them next to his body, close to where the pain was. Charles became friendly with one boy in particular, Bob Fagin, and he was to use his name much later in *Oliver Twist*.

There were some pleasures. His mother would sometimes come and see him at Warren's. He played on the coal barges with his workmates during their breaks. Best of all, though, was the money he earned. The one good thing about his father being bankrupt and in prison was that part of the money Charles got from Warren's was his own to spend. He carefully counted it out into little piles, and whenever he could, he would visit grand eating places, like a beef house on Drury Lane, a tavern on Parliament Street, or a coffee shop in the West End. He would order a meal and a drink, tip the waiter, and stroll back to his room.

It was at this time that Dickens started doing what he would do for the rest of his life: he told stories to the people around him. Some were straight fibs—about how he lived in this or that grand house. They helped mark him out as different, a young gentleman almost, even though the Dickens family was down at the bottom of society. But any dreams he might have had of being as grand as the people in the books he had read were now dashed. He had fallen into what people today call the poverty trap, a place it looks as if you can never get out of. And it depressed and terrified him.